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UNCLAS HANOI 000086

SIPDIS

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E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [KIRF](#) [PHUM](#) [VM](#) [RELFREE](#)

SUBJECT: JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES SEEK OFFICIAL REGISTRATION

Ref: 03 Hanoi 2153

1. (SBU) Summary: The Jehovah's Witnesses maintain a small network of unregistered churches across Vietnam. In urban areas, they have developed working relationships with authorities that allow them to operate unofficially, although smaller congregations in rural areas report some harassment. The Witnesses are seeking official recognition and have sent several requests to the GVN, but are unlikely to receive any positive reply in the foreseeable future. End Summary.

2. (SBU) Two representatives of Jehovah's Witnesses congregations from Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City described a small but active community in Vietnam in a meeting with poloff January 12, with congregations of 70-100 members in Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City (five congregations), and Ca Mau, and smaller congregations in Nam Dinh, Bien Hoa, and Dalat. Many Witnesses in the south were pre-1975 converts, when the denomination operated legally, while others converted more recently through contacts abroad or with relatives in the Vietnamese diaspora.

3. (U) According to these two Witnesses, most congregations meet three times per week, and three times per year there are nationwide "conventions" for discussion and bible study. The last convention in Ho Chi Minh City had over 700 attendees, while the most recent one in Hanoi had 115, they said. In both cases, the Witnesses had informed local police about the conventions and sought permission to rent space for the gatherings, but proceeded even in the absence of a formal response.

4. (SBU) The various congregations try to keep local police informed of their meetings, and were generally allowed to continue as they pleased, the two noted. Police once told the Hanoi congregation that it could not meet without being officially registered, but it has continued to do so without any repercussions. The HCMC groups have even better relations; at least one congregation even sends copies of The Watchtower (in Vietnamese) to the police. (note: It is unclear if these are imported from overseas or printed locally, which in either would probably be considered illegal. end note) The two reported some harassment of meetings in Nam Dinh and Binh Hoa, where the Witnesses had sometimes found it difficult to purchase land. One Witness had been refused a teaching job and called in to a police station for questioning five times as a result of her faith, they claimed.

5. (U) The two representatives said that for the past few years the Witnesses had attempted officially to register with the GVN (as noted in ref tel). Neither knew exactly what steps church elders had taken to do this, but said it involved forwarding correspondence from their parent organization in Australia to the GVN. Both said they would actively continue seeking formal recognition and that it was very important to the Witnesses that they be allowed to register legally. Teaching the bible is important to their faith, they explained, and they were unable to do this effectively without official status, they admitted.

6. (SBU) Comment: Even other Protestant denominations further along in the registration process like the Baptists have found the climate less welcoming in recent months, apparently in part awaiting progress on the long-awaited Ordinance on Religion. As other Protestants have commented, views of the Witnesses against military service and giving blood may also heighten official suspicion, and the provision of materials from Australia alone could be the kiss of death to hopes of gaining a formal legal status. While apparently still expanding, the Witnesses' lack of legal protections and occasional petty harassment by GVN officials will continue to limit their growth for the foreseeable future.

BURGHARDT